

Slipshod reportage taints book about Nazi doctor Mengele

Reviewed by
Brian Richard Boylan

Any book claiming to be "the complete story" about Josef Mengele requires an objective, detached overview and close cooperation from people who were close to the Nazi fugitive. Posner, a lawyer, and Ware, a journalist, make such a claim but fall short. So short that much of their good research is tainted by sloppy reportage.

The pivot for this book is a controversial, scientifically laughable series of discoveries and revelations—all orchestrated or blessed by the Mengele family in West Germany. Last year an international manhunt for the "angel of death" of Auschwitz was suddenly hauled up short by an announcement that Mengele had died in 1979 while living as a cranky hermit in South America—not in Paraguay, as had long been suspected, but in southern Brazil.

After the announcement his pseudonymous grave was discovered, opened, and a handful of bones and a partial skull were tossed back and forth by Brazilian cops to amuse the paparazzi. Even before the grave was located, the regional attorney general predicted that the bones were Mengele's.

Seemingly from nowhere, pathologists and other forensic experts were stumbling over one another, announcing that they would identify the bones. Expanding the horizons of science, they used videotape to superimpose images of the skull and a photograph of Mengele taken almost 50 years earlier.

Mengele: The Complete Story

By Gerald Posner
and John Ware

McGraw-Hill

364 pages, \$18.95

Identification of the bones established a dramatically different interpretation of how Mengele had lived. According to this theory, he was not the dapper archangel of death, slipping from one hideout to the next, sprinkling his paths with gold.

Instead, he spent his exile in isolation, up to the day in 1979 when he suffered a stroke while paddling in the Atlantic ocean, then drowned before help could reach him.

As far as Posner and Wade are concerned, this judgment about his life and death was the real scoop, and they set about revising Mengele's history.

Catching the scent of a true believer, the Mengele family in Germany offered the authors first peek at the piles of handwritten diaries, letters and photos. That their book appears just one year after all this largesse suggests that the authors hardly had time to skim the surface of so much documentation while whipping a manuscript into shape.

Posner and Ware demand complete acceptance of their authorized version of the Mengele story. Those whose research or experience conflict with this revision are dismissed

as gullible, naive or liars.

The authors spend too many pages on rebutting their competition, and too few on bolstering their own theories. What they have here is too much evidence. Very little new material is shored up properly and thoroughly.

There are some nasty questions that Posner and Ware simply fail to answer. Consider the position of the president of Paraguay, Alfredo Stroessner. For years he has been hotly denying any connection with Mengele. Wouldn't news of Mengele's death in Brazil have been trumpeted in Asuncion?

Then there is Mengele's family in Germany. Just a few months before the grave was opened, the doctor's nephew and operating head of the family business, Dieter Mengele, publicly pleaded with his uncle to give himself up in West Germany and stand trial for war crimes. (Germany does not have the death penalty, even for Nazi criminals.) Dieter claimed that the family was buckling under such intense pressures. Would he have gone through an elaborate spectacle had he known that his uncle had drowned in 1979?

And what about the government of Israel? It has yet to accept the drowning theory. Numerous authors, journalists, diplomats have returned from Paraguay convinced that Mengele was still there after his reported death. Are they quacks or boobs?

When not carrying on about their "authorized biography," the authors take on the scuzzy side of the Mengele business. Shady journalists, gullible tourists, bamboozled authors, former cops, bush-league elderly Nazis—all are examined mercilessly. The only times that Posner and Ware retract their claws are when they are dealing with internationally prominent Nazi hunters. They include individuals and organizations that have raised and spent millions of dollars to discover and capture Mengele.

It is sad that the victims of Josef Mengele and their families are thwarted in their desire to see Mengele captured and put on trial. Too many questions remain unanswered. This book does clarify some of the confusion.

Brian Richard Boylan met Josef Mengele in Argentina in 1977 and wrote about the Nazi physician in his novel "Final Trace."

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